

CC 206

AAR – Washington, DC
Mystical Erotica: Gay Living as Spiritual/Religious Practice

RESPONSE

A few years ago, I was invited to attend – ~~as some of you no doubt also were~~ – an event billed as a Gay Spirituality Summit. It was held in Garrison, New York, at a former Catholic Capuchin monastery turned Buddhist retreat centre. I went there as an outsider, in two senses of the word: first, as an academic, and therefore someone who, by virtue of training and conviction, tends to look at religious phenomena from a critical distance; and second, in appearance at least, as a religiously non-practicing gay man. I say “in appearance” because, as we all know, the quest never leaves you, though it may pull you in a hundred different directions, sometimes simultaneously.

The Summit was certainly an eclectic mix – of individuals, of practices, and of expectations. I know mine were not met on several levels. I may have been too much the aloof academic to let myself be touched by some of the intense spiritual urgings on display. So I sat and observed. You could do many things if you wanted – everything from masturbating en groupe while watching the sun rise, to meditating in the great hall (formerly the chapel) in front of a statuesque Buddha. Conflicts arose in the group of some 100 men, as they inevitably would. I remember one in particular which centred on this Buddha who presided silently over our group sessions. Several men wanted ~~this~~ *the* statue covered; they were challenging the unspoken assumption that gay spiritual practice should be tied to any religious paradigm at all, particularly one perceived as inevitably or automatically Asian. Permeating the Summit, however, was an intense and deep sense of the interconnectivity of *of religion and the erotic,* religio and eros, of spirit and body. One could simply not be at

such a gathering of spiritually aware gay men without sensing the energy in the air, or, for that matter, smelling the faint aroma of spent bodily fluids hover delightfully along the monastic corridors. If nothing else, this was the most vivid impression I walked away with from the Summit – that you can’t talk gay religion without doing gay sex, and vice-versa. Gay bodies and gay spirit need each other.

Our presenters this afternoon have spoken to us eloquently of spirit and eros, and of the intimate ties that bind them. We even heard some mystical and poetic flights of grandeur. Each has given us a fine piece of work, thoughtful and thought-provoking, and able to elicit a multitude of questions, a sampling of which I will pose later. But sadly enough, I did not smell any sex, or, at least, not very much of it – and this, despite the fact that I kept sniffing the air. Using a central icon from two of the papers, let’s just say that I was hoping the Good Gray Poet would come across as a tad muskier, aromatically speaking.

These elegant papers have raised three questions in my mind, and I put them out there – raw and unfinished – for your further consideration. They flow from the sub-title of this session: gay living as spiritual and religious practice. First, is this, in fact, truly possible? Can gay living – I mean here an embodied and sexualized gay living – really be a path for genuine spiritual fulfillment? Our presenters suggest it can, though each uses a different reference point, whether politics, poetry, or the art of religious tinkering. Perhaps a bit of each of these is necessary for the recipe to rise, as it were. Second, can a positive gay spiritual practice take place within established religious pathways, or must it always – and perhaps inevitably – be, as one of our presenters suggests, “alternative” to its very core? I ask here the question of belonging and identity, but also the more vexing

one of religious institutional bigotry. A sub-question: can the gay community itself – gay culture and all its trappings – perhaps serve as a better ^{well if not} suited source of religious insight?

I would passionately defend that it can. I think our presenters might agree, but I'm not 100% sure. And my third question: by what criteria can we – or must we – judge gay living to be spiritually or religiously uplifting. Do we even need to? Perhaps not, though it must be remembered that all spiritual traditions do raise the query and outline their own criteria in helping to guide the journey. Are the religious or spiritual experiences of gay men simply too eclectic – or rather too individualistic – to even think of such normative standards? More importantly, is such a question necessary, or rather too judgemental? I will let these interrogations simmer for a while.

Let me now ask our presenters some rather more precise questions.

In his ^{very} interesting and ^{carefully} suggestive piece, Peter Savastano, ever the anthropologist, argues that “the holy art of bricolage” – a kind of religious tinkering – is how gay men can construct religious lives for themselves. He mentions, in passing, his fieldwork at Easton Mountain. I would have liked to hear more about this fieldwork, and, specifically, what he means by gay intentional communities. Sociologically speaking, how do these communities come about, and how are they maintained? The same goes for rituals at Easton Mountain. Are there examples beyond that of the Soulful Circle which can give us insights into how bricolage operates at the level of ritual – which is where, ultimately, religion lives and breathes? Bricolage as a theoretical tool has immensely rich potential, as Peter and others demonstrate so well. But in French, the word “bricolage” also has the specific connotation of a hobby or pastime, of something not fundamentally important or

meaningful. ^{Are gay male forms of spirituality only incidental, or is it} Does the anthropological term ignore this meaning, or simply bypass it? ^{were?}

I was especially intrigued by the idea of gay men as "lewd bricoleurs." This has very rich and colourful possibilities, and this is one place I wish I had smelt sex more directly. I would recommend that Peter "play" with this term more explicitly and in far greater depth. Finally, I echo the story of the gay men at Garrison and the statue of the Buddha. Are you suggesting, Peter, that Buddhism offers the "best" venue or means for the holy art of bricolage? Why? I sometimes feel that Western gay spirituality, in its hurried flight from Christianity, has turned blindly toward Buddhism as the new religious paradigm.

John Allard's ~~elegant~~ ^{insightful} paper whets our appetite. By this I mean that I wish he had given us more of the beautiful poetry of these talented gay poets – not only more poetry, but more explicitly homoerotic poetry. Here again, I did not smell the sex. The assumption seems to be – and John can correct me if I'm wrong – that deep mystical vision cannot be grounded in the erotic. If so, this goes against much of what we know about the insights of several religious mystics, as they themselves talked and wrote about their experiences of union with the sacred, sometimes in rather sexy terms. John's use of the term "alternative" to describe this poetry, ^{as mentioned in his title,} also struck me as being problematic. Does it not "de-gay" the poetry of his gay poets? But I realize there may be no better term. The use of Zaehner's typology of mysticism as well begs the question. As I recall, it has a threefold profile: nature mysticism, soul or monistic mysticism, and theistic mysticism. And good Catholic Christian that he was, Zaehner thought the last was the superior of the three, the more perfect mystical experience. Does this implied theism not raise some basic suspicions about the model as such, and particularly its applicability to gay poetry, mystical or otherwise? Or is John suggesting that there is no such thing as gay mystical poetry? Finally, I want to pick up on something that John raises – only too briefly and

→ Peter ^{also} suggests that within us all, ^{as well as} in our spiritual practices, might be found ^{hidden} elements of a uniquely gay religion. We need to tease these out – boldly, deliberately, unambiguously.

tantalizingly – in his concluding paragraph: the pull between difference and sameness. I

have argued elsewhere that sameness stands at the very heart of the gay experience and

presence in the world, due to our erotic choices for that which is like us. It is interesting

to see John echo this, ^{and I agree with his preliminary analysis,} though it needs to be worked ^{well} ~~through more carefully~~ ^{out} in greater depth.

Juan Herrero Brasas' ^{beautifully} ~~well~~ crafted text gives us a refreshing perspective on one of the true icons of gay history and consciousness, the towering Walt Whitman. Juan

properly situates Whitman's enterprise – which was fundamentally a political one – in the ^{and sociological} broader nineteenth century American utopian vision of, and movement for, a better, ^{and} ~~less~~

divided world. The suggestion is made that Whitman thought this could be done through

the illusive "love of comrades." But here again, there seems to be no sex in this love – or

at least Juan seems to avoid it. Why? Is it really possible that it cannot be there? It

strikes me as a strangely disembodied love – or, at the very least, an empty affection.

When I first read Juan's paper, I thought I would hear more about this cult of Whitman,

the church that William James claims existed. What about those "hot little prophets?"

How were they "hot" with each other, and with the master poet himself? The rituals

mentioned seem pretty tame from our vantage point. Were there other types or genres of

homoerotic rituals? They might provide significant clues to what a "love of comrades"

might mean practically, how it was lived out by the poet and his closest disciples. ^{The language of the quote from "Democratic Vistas" strikes me as deeply homoerotic.} Here

again, the study of such rituals – their textures, tones, and incidences – might open up

new avenues of reflection and analysis. Juan also raises important sociological questions

having to do with mysticism, but more importantly, charisma. For Weber, charismatic

authority was always destabilizing (it was how religious change often occurred), and it

was contingent upon the assent of the followers. I sense that both of those were operative

in the case of Walt Whitman's grand vision, but one needs to tease out precisely how. Finally, in trying to make some linkages between Juan's paper and the one by John, I asked myself whether Whitman's mystical poetry, and therefore his poetry generally, can be read and truly appreciated without its homoerotic subtext, despite what the great poet himself may have said. I will let both presenters fight that one out, if fight there needs to be.

So I say thank you on your behalf to our presenters for a remarkably fine and engaging collection of papers. I have surely thrown out enough questions to launch many a conversation. But please, let us now talk about sex. There is no other way that I know of to be queerly mystical.